

THE ABSURD DEMISE OF
POULNABRONE

COMING SOON BY LIAM HOWLEY

Let All Lie With Her

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POULNABRONE

Liam Howley

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For Ursula
For Lucia

... of roots

Cornelius said his name as he swung his legs from the bed. He yawned and stretched, his back arched, his hands held high. The frame creaked, its dowels and screws being loose from years of use. Keeping his eyes closed, he felt the stiffness of sleep drain from his joints. "Cornelius Solitude Conlon," he groaned, as though by saying his name the darkness of the summer night would appear less solitary, the waning moon, almost clouded over, not so alone in its descent. He looked to his bed stand, where the photo of his wife stood proud beside the glass in which his dentures soaked. Lifting them from the glass, he shook the fluid from them before placing them in his mouth. He stretched again and groaned. Rising with

care he winced as the floorboards creaked. His daughter was a light sleeper, and he didn't wish to wake her at this early hour. Reaching towards the wall, he fumbled about. He found the switch. The light on the dresser flickered on and off and finally on. Dressing quickly, he stood by the mirror and looked at the gash beneath his left eye where a scab had formed. Resisting the temptation to pick at the scab, he lowered his gaze to where the folds of his skin hung slack and dry. He grunted. All notions of youth remained only in shade. Most mornings this would have passed him by, but that morning he noticed. He grunted again and ran his comb through his beard and hair.

If his intention had been to quietly slip out of the house, he soon changed his mind. Light streamed into the hallway through the glass panels of the kitchen door. The aroma of bacon wafting from the kitchen guided his feet so that he turned from the hall door and rounded the stair. His daughter was already at the stove.

"You're up early," Lily said. Though she was smiling, her voice betrayed her disapproval. Her short hair and no-nonsense manner gave lie to her twenty-six years. She had the air of a long-married mother.

He made his way over to the armchair, under which his boots lay, and squeezed his bulk into the frame. It creaked and exhaled, the soft sponge cushion with its green and threadbare cover yielding to his weight.

"You needn't have got up," he said as he leaned forward and groped about. His fingers found the loose laces. Pulling his boots out, he fumbled at a knot.

"And what are you going to walk on then?" She lifted the tray from the grill and dumped its contents beside the fried eggs. Four slices of bread quickly replaced the bacon. She put the kettle on the stove and took down two mugs from where they hung. A wave of

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tiredness engulfed her. She stood staring at the kettle for a moment, lost in blank reverie, until her eye caught the crack that ran through the pastel-shaded plaster from behind the cupboard. She grimaced and stood up straight from her stooped position. The house may sag, but she wasn't going to wilt herself. The boiling kettle spurred her to action.

"Have ye been dreaming again?" she asked, as she bustled about. Though he didn't answer, she saw his still reflection in the window pane. No response was necessary. Her lips pursed, she brought the plate over and set it on the table, drawing him from his armchair.

That lately he'd been having the same dream marked it apart: A flood, beginning first with the slow trickle of water over broken banks, spreading low and wide across the broad sweep of open fields. Tongues licking the dry earth of village streets, the hemlines of buildings. Water rising beneath eaves and trusses, bats fluttering through the light of day. Alarmed, but this ghostly village a deserted fief. Only the birds still nestled, but nervous. Now shifting, now rising, circling above pools and eddies, chirping out warnings, fluttering from branch to branch, darting to and from their young in vain hope, their nests floating above subsumed branches, crystalline apparitions vanishing slow and steady beneath gases belched from the relentless digestion of solids; the waters rise interminable and altogether without precedent, for no rain fell, its design being of the mind of man. Always the same: a morsel of resignation and sorrow, a colloid of heart, of love for life and the habits of life so carefully wrought in homes and fields. Immiscible, the sediment of sacrifice hanging by cline, trailing the depths, leaving naught but the residue of possession. Scraps of furniture. Loose leaves of a forgotten tome. A tweed hat. Mary standing on the newly formed shore where her tears fell and trickled.

Leaving the kitchen for a moment, Cornelius returned with a

pile of maps and charts rolled up beneath his arm. To his daughter's annoyance, those charts were soon unrolled on the kitchen table with an assortment of plates and cups weighing the corners to keep them flat. Lily sighed. She wondered what he saw in them, if anything at all. He knew the land better than any map, and the climate charts bore no relation to the weather of the day. Ignoring the slow rising pain of indigestion, she watched him as bent over he traced lines and contours across the various papers. Although a regular activity, familiarity did little to ease her bemusement. "You should eat up before the food goes cold," she said, drawing his gaze, distracting him from his obsession.

Rugged, his eyes were like depressions, sunk below fronts of cold and warmth. A face marked by lines knotted tight into highs and lows, mirroring the isobars of his charts. His mood was often flagged in advance by the tightness of his brow or the flush of colour that rose in his cheeks. He could spend hours in a trance, stooped over his papers with their wave-like oscillations as though they offered him insight, making profound declarations such as, "The language of God is in the weather." And though his mood could often be read, when bent in observation he was as unpredictable as the rain or morning sun. She never knew if he would calm or explode or merely remain steady.

"Will you take my recordings for me today?" he asked her, looking up from his stooped position with a quizzical expression.

Although it was not an infrequent request, it further reminded her of his obsessive interest in the weather. She looked out the window at the rain gauge and Stevenson's box, almost as though to reassure herself of what he spoke. They were the best kept items that he had, and each and every day at twelve noon their measurements were recorded without fail.

"Sure," she said, her attention drifting to the clothesline where

she'd left the clothes out overnight. She began counting the items, making sure that none were missing. Two of her best slips had disappeared in recent times. Her gaze turned to the barometer on the shed's wall. It gleamed with the dawn light.

Steam rose from the mug of tea as he lifted it from the corner of a topographical map. The corner rolled inwards towards the centre. "Is Tara here?" he asked as he took a sip.

"Nope. She's with her gran."

"I'd like to see her today."

She smiled. He'd taken to telling Tara the same tales he used to tell her as a child. "I'll bring her around later."

"If I'm here to see her then, that is."

"Sure, if you're here." If she sounded resigned, she wasn't. Just moments later she was scolding him again. "You're getting too old for this, Dad," she chided, before lifting her cup to her mouth. "This pilgrimage of yours is insane." He raised an eyebrow against her admonition.

"You could come with me."

"I won't."

"I know."

"I'll leave you up by the gap though. Save you getting the bus. Give you an earlier start to the day."

"Thanks, Lily."

"Ah, think nothing of it. Sure, I've to go that way anyway."

o

The rain fell light as Cornelius walked. He walked where the slow slopes of the moorlands dipped and the streams began. He shuffled east towards the sun, that hidden by clouds, rose steady and cast a diffuse light over the blanket of purple- and rust-coloured heather. Bog cotton resisted the gentle mist and stood leaning and laden. Beneath the heather and cotton, walls of peat: rigid

lines carved in the land where turf had once been harvested for fuel and then stacked to dry, an activity that brought back memories. Dark pools of water in the cut terrain. A low wall of stone and some scattered rocks, the remaining traces of human settlement. Empty now. Sadness. Beside him the stream gurgled, callow, carrying sand and silt and pebbles, polishing grey and white stones smooth as it carved from the hill its path that in time would alter, as all paths must.

He cast his eyes about as he walked. To the north the land dropped away and rose again in a majestic sweep. Scree marked the foot of spruce plantations that stood dark and geometric and at odds. At a point marked by nothing in particular, he left the path and picked his way amongst the heather. The valley slope turned sheer as it came into view. At its steepest point stood two boulders, against which water smashed and plunged in kinetic fervour. He stared for a moment, as he always did, letting his thoughts drown in the torrent of sound from the fall. Keeping his eyes on the landscape, he took a plastic bag from his pocket and removed a biscuit. He nibbled on it for a moment. When he began again the rain had ceased and clouds parted and a mist rose from the damp sheen of his oilskin coat. The day was hot.

o

Slow steps amongst the footprints of ghosts, where when the clouds hung low and dense, a movement of peoples could be discerned. He'd walked here since the earliest days when his father had brought him searching for wayward sheep. This land of apparitions where mountains ran from coast and back to coast, a landscape strewn with messages and meanings, where podzols and poverty were synonyms even the soils could understand. Not ghosts once, but men and women, carving their lives out from the shallow soils, from the raised beds of the thin organic layer where

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only potatoes could be grown, where the worn remnants of birch and oak had long ago been subsumed and the land then rinsed of sustenance but for sheep and heather and furze. Over where he looked, a tale etched in falling walls, of sheep eaten and dogs scavenging amongst the bones, the pauper's house of stone on stone abandoned and crumbling, an anonymous cenotaph for future witness. Everywhere the land starving. Shuffling steps, ravenous, ragged, fathers and mothers carrying the dead and dying, their blood riven by hunger and the diseases of hunger. Rivers tainted and poisoned. Pools of clumped corpse and coliform in slow waters where sedges and reeds pushed from the shallow and sodden earth. Human and yet not human, vomited as a poison is purged with ruthless force, through convulsion and spasm, like how some great articulation in hyperextension is rendered sunder.

He thought ahead, the route a close companion. Always the same destination, always ending by the reservoir beneath which lay that mythical place of his birth. He'd grown up nearby, lived and farmed in an adjacent valley and having returned from war, married his childhood sweetheart and made his home in the village. He'd fished in the river, cut peat from the uplands, returned to where his heart had resided, to where his mind had held steady. His first three children had been born by the river's banks and he'd buried those children in the field by the back of his house. Life and death a cycle as certain as the water's fall.

o

The stream widened and gathered pace as the peat gave way to the lower slopes. Leaning on his cane, he left the stream and cut a path down the ridge. Oak and ash grew stunted and thick before giving way to spruce, and his trousers grew heavy as the wet grass soaked them below the knee. Whorls of needles pricked his skin. Pushing the branches aside, he took each step with care, the earth

muddy and full of loose granite and quartz, the ground treacherous. He took his time. With his stealthy advance, the young fallow buck remained oblivious to his presence. Equally unaware, he jumped, as startled, the buck leapt, grey and black backed, skipping from behind an off-cut of spruce, sending stones rattling free to scatter on the slope. Dislodged seed cones tumbled and bounced and settled where rushes grew amongst the moss. He looked about to gather his bearings. Wood shavings littered the ground from where the thicket had been thinned. The only sound was his grumbling, his voice casting a low timbre against the unnatural silence. No birds sang there.

Panting hard, he reached the lower limits of the ridge. Rejoining the river, he arrived at a point where two waters met and where the River Folly began. His lips were dry and his head throbbed with thirst. He made straight for the water. Brushing past the brittle stems of an elder, he stooped down by the river's bank and lifted a cup full in his giant hands. Beautiful and cold. He drank greedily.

Splashing water against his face, he felt it trickle and run, tracing the scar, which throbbed with the rush of blood. He touched it gingerly, pressed against the tender flesh, checked for any undue soreness that would indicate infection. There was none. He nodded softly in affirmation. Easier now.

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At six foot six he was a giant of a man, his towering presence curved by his arching spine and drooping shoulders. On his left cheek, the scar: a random distraction leading him to a collision with MacGuire's clothes store shutter. Although a normal occurrence for a man of his height, it had spooked him, for he remembered his uncle, of whom he didn't just resemble, but was identical - they differed only in the lack of a scar beneath his left eye, at least until that day two weeks ago.

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“Don’t be a baby,” Lily had scolded as she’d rubbed TCP into his wound, his wince drawing her sting even as she drew out the dirt. “It’ll heal,” she’d said, his withdrawal from her cotton swab making her strangely happy.

Staring at the water dripping from his rough and cupped hands, he pondered that day. Lily’s grumbling nature hadn’t bothered him. He knew she understood. Few else did.

Everybody avoided him. He had the madness of Sweeney, and a grip of iron that could crush a man’s hand. Although his height would cause him to knock against the frames of doors made for smaller men, it had once proved his saving grace. Serving at the Gallipoli landings, the Dublin brigade, composed of men of shorter stature than the average British soldier, were pushed into the water too far from shore, their heavy backpacks ensuring that each to a man had drowned, but for himself. The First World War had been a process of rebirth for him, the trenches a womb through which a rush of blood and effluent flowed. Enlisting at the tender age of fourteen, he’d left the war just a few years later, unscathed but for the scars he wore inside and the enduring legacy of intestinal problems caused by dysentery. He would wake with tinnitus ringing in his ears, accompanying the ghosts of men falling to machine gun fire and mortar rounds, and would remember that upon arriving home he was told that what he had fought and suffered for had been a betrayal, and that the people he thought he’d been fighting for considered him a traitor.

It was later that he’d begun preaching, standing on his box outside the village church extolling the virtues of a harmonious existence. Sometimes he spoke with his hands in the air, his cane held high, his imposing frame looming high in the street. At other times, it was with his back arched and his chin lifted and his thumbs in the pockets of his waistcoat. And if he wasn’t talking about the bene-

fits of swimming for those suffering from traumatic spinal stress, or just general backache—a perennial preoccupation—then he would point to the earth and the tunnels beneath Poul nabrone, and the clouds that grew dense in the sky, informing his fears on everything right up to the end of history itself.

“Does history have an end?” he wondered aloud as his sight grew hazy, the water’s roar masking the riparian world. It was a question he’d put to Lily whilst she’d dabbed at his wound. It had seemed ridiculous to her, what with all the fuss made over ideologies and religions, but she’d humoured him and thought about it, and then answered in a manner that had surprised him.

“An end to history? Hmmm. Don’t you mean an end to the narrative? Or is it culture? Or even identity? I don’t know. I guess everything has a point of dissolution.” She’d ceased treating his wound and was instead looking at the dress on her mannequin that she’d been so carefully working on. A thread stood dangling from a seam. She looked back towards him, her eyes vacant, staring. “The danger with perfection is the closer you get to it, the greater the risk of its unravelling. That’s the problem. From the eye of a creator, nothing is perfect, ever. A thing must contain flaws, or it’s a dead thing, something that cannot even be abandoned. It’s finished, devoid of purpose, not even possible.

“You know the closest thing to perfection I know is the plain unworked cloth. It’s in its end-state, but at its beginning also. I cut it, shape it, stitch sequins and lace, add seams, dye it, add a million little imperfections to give it life.” She raised her eyebrows as though indicating the insignificance of such thoughts.

“Ah, history’s just something to discuss over a cup of tea or a pint. It’s meaningless otherwise,” she finally said. She grabbed his chin and moved his head roughly to the side. “Now stay still.” He winced.

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Her words gained meaning as he watched the water pass onwards, the sea its point of dissolution. Roaring about him, the two rivers merged over a gravel bed. Ahead on his path the river bent from view. To his mind, even such a fluid mass as the ocean was narrated, filled with rivers whose banks were mere gradients of motion, temperature, salinity, a great turning that to man appeared evident where sea met land as some Ferris wheel of cloud and rain and river. He rose and stepped back from the gravel shore, and after looking about made his way to a smooth basalt rock where he could rest his creaking frame and eat his cheddar sandwich. Ransom covered the earth, the air pungent. A robin fluttered and landed near him as he ate. Oak and willow leaning over braided currents. They would part further downstream before meeting again. He knew this land, these waters, his self: not one river but a multitude, not one current but many, a myriad of encounters made seamless until they were not.

o

Coming out into a hotel's grounds, he made his way along the road. He stopped to let a car pass, and neatly missed the spray from the puddle at the roadside. Rounding the bend, he walked straight into a funeral procession, bound from some unknown dwelling to the chapel at the rivers' meet. Instinctively blessing himself, he stopped and watched as the procession passed with the deceased borne aloft and trailed by black-suited mourners. Such slow sombre steps. Grimaces and smiles. Tearful eyes. Weary faces. Shawls and veils. A low hum of conversation drifting from the rear. The deceased's kin supporting a frail woman. She lifted her veil and looked at him, just a glance, enough to clear a wreath of mist, to remind him of the day he'd held his wife in his arms, and then later, carried her in slow procession to an earthen embrace.

A long moment passed, and the procession moved on before

Cornelius regained his senses. He was swaying, muttering to himself, the toes of his boots submerged in a puddle at the verge, whilst pronouncements and declarations ran currents through his mind as some river carving a path of madness. “But when the war for independence commenced, I would prove inspirational,” he said aloud, as he had done on many an occasion, and to none more so than his daughter on the day Mary had died. “Most people assumed the war was driven by a bunch of half-baked revolutionaries and poets, and that it would lead them to disaster. But no, I took up my pistol, and shouting the revolutionary cry, said, ‘I fight not for my country, but for God. I fight for Catholicism’. And if it hadn’t been for men like me we’d now be...

God knows we’d be...” his words had trailed out in an uncharacteristic burst of uncertainty. She had watched him with an eyebrow piqued.

“...Under the dominion of a decadent culture?” she’d asked, finishing for him with a wan smile, for she knew it all by heart, so many times had she heard it before.

“Exactly,” he’d asserted, a shade of embarrassment lighting up his cheeks, giving him an air of someone less than certain. He was no longer certain.

It was at the time of the dam’s construction that he’d begun to change. If it was the hand of Mary Rattigan that had steadied him, he’d seen in her fear and anguish for their enforced relocation a burning need for what his tortured mind had so failed to deliver. Staring at her coffin he’d understood, that his madness, all his fanaticism, was in fact empty, a fear driven zeal that sought to banish contradiction and doubt. That though he often spoke with what appeared to be a thundering conviction, it was in reality with a burning need to forget, and the certainty that all that was left were his nightmares and that great big chasm into which he stared.

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A short distance later he was back beneath the trees. The steady slope gave way as he followed the river. The valley broadened. The river was already settling, swelling in a slow meander that curled luxuriously on the soft fertile loam of the valley floor, placid beneath the boughs of birch and alder and willow. Farmland here. Tributaries flowing into the river, swelling it further, a divide in the land crossed by low wooden bridges. On one such bridge he passed a walker and tipped his cap in silent salute. "How's it going?" the stranger asked before passing on, leaving him to continue on his way. Behind him, and higher on the hill, loomed the old and grey menace of St. Josephs Reformatory. He shook his fist at it. He knew of that place, knew of the horror it had wrought on young men's lives.

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Shaking his head, he looked about and then settled his sight downhill. Little was new here. Occasionally a house would appear higher up by the road, some of which he knew intimately, other's of which he was less than sure. Most seemed bigger than he remembered. The last time he'd traced this route he'd had to stick to the road, the river having flooded over a broad sweep. He stopped to let his mind wander, to let remembrance take hold, to be pulled to where he'd once stood when the lights had first appeared, high up in the mountains, looking out over the constellations. It had seemed to him then, and it still did now, that man was a contradiction, a creature that made territories, but when looking on borders sought their dissipation. How else to describe the sky's collapse on earth, or how the days bled into night? Or that beneath the lights of the town all distinctions were reduced to shadows? In his mourning he'd borne witness to the multiplying stars, each constellation standing autonomous. And in his mourning, madness; all about him hell, so that he'd failed to see the heavens residing on earth.

It was on the day of his accident, just two weeks previous, that he'd observed that very contradiction of humanity. Having just had an argument with Dolores Blair, Lily was feeling less than stellar. Arriving back from the pier where she'd bought some fish, she'd been disgusted to see that the elm in their land had been cut. "And that aul so and so had the temerity to want to build a wall down by the pond and yet she has no respect for our border," she ranted. "Elms are dying all over the land, and here we are with some beautiful healthy trees, and her in her ignorance, just cuts them. I mean, on our land," she shouted, "our land! Surely she knows by now that the elms have nothing to do with the subsidence. Surely, she must know that at least."

The rains had come and then receded, leaving clouds lingering through the tepid warmth of summer. Everyone was agitated; no one more so than Lily, who besides having to deal with an inconsiderate neighbour and a book full of orders, also had to listen to her father. Not enamoured with his usual audience, he'd consigned himself to bending his daughter's ear from his less than comfortable kitchen chair. He stared out the window. The tips of conifers swaying over rooftops. Cordyline at Doyle's corner. Crows rising from their nests as men cut the pines beneath the wires. Turning to his daughter, he sniffed the air. "Can you smell it, Lily?"

"Smell what?" She was busy and irritated and ill-inclined to humour him.

"The vapours, Lily, seeping up through the earth from those tunnels?"

"What, over this mackerel?"

"But can you not smell the stench, the noxious fumes of subterfuge and hypocrisy? Can you not smell it, Lily?"

"I can smell the swamp. And I still haven't gotten the smell of the

fish market from my nostrils.”

“Well, it reeks, Lily. It reeks of affairs. It reeks of corruption and moral decay. It reeks, Lily.”

“If you say so, Da,” she said, only belatedly realizing her contrariness. Didn’t they know by now it was the tunnels that caused subsidence? Had she not just had that argument with Dolores Blair? And there she was giving short change to her father’s grumbling agreement, just because he had spoken. The thought struck her that she was now arguing with herself, causing her to quietly shriek. Stopping what she was doing, she breathed deep and studied him, his wide eyes intent, his mariner’s cloud of grey and white hair running from his chin, the gash that stood red and inflamed. He looked a sight. Not at all together. She was worried. He’d come so far.

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Living alone with his daughter, for a time no one but Lily had noticed him change. It was like a flower unfolding, an imagining, a rational thought in an irrational mind that opened it up to bloom. At first its effect was gradual, however, as time wore on what was gradual grew marginal, and what was marginal, central, and though he was still ruled by compulsion, that semblance of rationality became more and more established. He began wandering, and would disappear into St Brigit’s woods, or could be seen strolling along the lanes and hedges that bordered fields, his walking stick, too short for purpose, always in hand. He would take young Tara with him, and arriving at the birch at the wood’s edge, with its viral protrusions and distorted trunk, would tell her a tale of a beautiful woman, who upon disparaging the daoine sidhe, had stopped to rest and been turned to wood. Gazing at that tree, she would run her hand along its feminine curve and wonder her crime. It seemed to her young eyes that this twisted bole was an embrace, a holding

tight to earth a moment that would otherwise have passed unheeded. She would wander on with him, and in all weathers, beneath the rain clouds or sun of the open sky, or amidst the smog and coastal fog or mists and frosts of spring and autumn, wherein the grey man lurked seeking prey. Encountering a farmer, her ears would prick to attention, for their talk would often be of the effects of the weather on the year's harvest, or on the price obtained for sucklers at the local mart. They would talk of cattle and land, of the impossibility of anything but the sale of livestock and crops, for wasn't it all fixed for the empire? Aye it was, always was. And she would watch her grandda, a man prone to remembrance, taking note where his conversations turned.

It was while he was absorbed by the horror of his wartime memories that he almost walked into the hole. His mind, being a hive of activity, had been keeping him awake at night, so that whenever he wasn't focused on his mental abstractions, he could be seen daydreaming, which to many villagers, his daughter included, all amounted to one and the same thing. As he passed where his wife was buried, he stopped for a moment, his heart wilting along with the rose that sat at her grave. "At the heart of understanding stands a rose with falling petals," he muttered, though he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he barely noticed Áine Dunne as she passed; his words of roses and understanding a muted utterance of a remembered voice that barely registered for the lumbering mechanics of his churning mind. In fact, he was so engrossed in remembrance that he didn't notice the great big hole that a number of villagers stood around and into which he almost fell. Not only would he have sustained a serious injury, he would almost certainly have taken one or two of the old men with him if it hadn't been for some quick reactions and strong hands on the part of more than one of the villagers. "Woh there, Con!" chimed the chorus as they

steadied him, the possession of his mind released by the hold on his arm as he tilted precariously over the open street. “No need to be going ahead of time,” added Anthony Burke, who had been alerted to the hole by the crashing sound of the cobbles’ collapse. He dropped his cane. It clattered onto the upturned stone.

What was remarkable was that though Cornelius vaguely remembered the thundering vibrations, he was so preoccupied by his lament that he didn’t even notice the dust that had risen and now covered the men who stood around the hole as though they were ghosts looking into a well searching for wisdom. He stopped with them for a moment as they each pointed out something obvious, some shaking their head for the stupidity of it all, whilst others chuckled, it being an interruption about which the inevitable jokes would surface. True to form, he didn’t take long in providing relief. “Sure, it’s appropriate enough isn’t it,” he observed. He bent over to pick up his hazel stick. “I mean, a hole appearing in the crotch of the town.” He gave a knowing sniff. A number of men sniggered. Others walked off in disgust. The hole had formed right at the point where the main street separated in two, a pair of legs joining the body of the town. The church sat behind him. “Now, I wonder if it’s the back or the front of the town we’re looking at?” he remarked, loud enough for the departing men to hear.

It was Seamus O’Reilly that pulled him up. “Shouldn’t you be off pointing your ridiculous crutch at someone? Go on, hobble along.”

Cornelius looked at his cane. It really was too short to support a man of his size. He shrugged. Needing a cup of tea, he returned to his home, his mind momentarily drifting into a memory of walking through a tunnel with his father and a number of men at an early age in life. It was as he rounded a corner that he struck the raised shutter.

“Those stupid Tullys,” he said to his daughter, as she placed the tweezers in his wound to remove some dirt. “I swear I can smell the vapours of hell seeping up through the earth, infusing the dreams of children with its fetid stench.”

Lily drew back to appraise his mood. She probed the wound again. He winced. “The only vapours seeping through the village are those of the swamp,” she finally rebutted. “And though noxious, sure enough, they’re hardly likely to infect the children’s minds.”

He stared out the window at the Blairs’ house, clearly visible now that they’d cut the last of the elms. The cracks and fissures in their walls were increasingly obvious. “But you know what those Tullys have done?” he prompted.

“What have they done?” She was annoyed, her mood disturbed by the phone call from MacGuire’s asking her to come and collect him. The dress she’d been working on stood on the mannequin in the corner.

“If you’re going to tunnel, you have to dig deep.” He deliberately ignored her terse tone. The pond sat low at the end of the garden. It hadn’t rained in weeks. The seasons were turning.

“Ah, the hole. I saw that. Puts a whole new perspective on potholes,” she laughed. “Well, there’ll be a new meeting point, so.”

“Aye, a hole in the crotch,” he chuckled. “Fancy that.” Her mood soured with his words. Like most, she was religious and observed the intricacies of the faith. “I wish you wouldn’t speak like that of the church,” she said, distressed by his ambivalence. He hadn’t always been that way. It was one change she didn’t appreciate.

“Well, they’re the ones obsessed with sex...”

“Jesus died for your sins,” she said, cutting him off. “Now stay still, will ye.” He twitched uncomfortably with her words. “Stay

still," she repeated, her tone increasingly cross, her easy humour giving way to her concerns.

She'd arrived at MacGuire's to find him staring in the mirror. Worried he was slipping back into his earlier madness, she gave vent to her frustrations. "I'm tired of being called out to get you. You're always walking into things, or falling over. Only last week, I had to help you get out of that swamp at the end of the garden. Imagine traipsing about in that mire in your good shoes, when you've a fine pair of wellies."

He sighed. She wasn't going to let go of that for a while. "But I'm telling you, Lily," he protested, "there's less and less water in that pond each year."

"That may be so, but did you have to lose a shoe to mud to prove it? I'm surprised you didn't fall into that damn hole." Too late, she gasped. "Now look what you've done, making me curse."

His eyes turned from the window to the wall in the kitchen, at the crack that ran down its length.

"If I'm just a cross to you, why do you bother?"

"Why do I bother, indeed? But let me tell you something. If you keep going on like that, you'll get into trouble."

"Aghhh... Stop kicking up a stink, would ye. It's the Tullys that should be in trouble." He brushed her hand away. "They call me crazy, but I'm the only one who can see that. They'll bring ruin to this town with their tunnels, mark my words."

"Ah, poor you, a regular Cassandra."

"Cassandra, what's she got to do with anything?"

Lily looked at him, her brow furrowed. She was still angry. But his manner was uncharacteristically defensive. "Cassandra who? Mrs Clony? Why, nothing of course." She grew inquisitive. He was terrible at hiding things. "What are you up to, you crazy man?"

"Nothing?" he sulked. "Come on, Lily. Don't you tell me I'm

crazy now. Not you.”

Looking at him askance, she took his chin in her hand and moved his cheek into view. “Damn it, Dad. Keep still, will ye. I’ve too much to do, and I still have to get this evening’s dinner.”

He grew sheepish. “Come on, Lily. Don’t be angry with me, my falling petal. Don’t argue.”

o

Leaving the river, he wandered up the boreen towards the cottage. Smoke billowed from the chimney. Two ruts of earth, compacted from years of use, ran parallel and were separated by uncut grass, making walking difficult for the unevenness of the land. Hazel and hawthorn protruded on the path, which was neglected and overgrown so that he wondered if anyone had walked that way since his last visit. Oak and willow, coppiced over the years, now grew dense and profuse. An apple tree. The pink bells of foxglove. He found the widow Hanlon in the farmyard at the back. Half deaf and labouring at a churn, she offered no indication of having noticed him. It was Blue, an aging and lethargic border collie, that greeted him, ambling over with her tail in full swing. He ignored the dog as it sniffed about his boots.

Having seen neither hoof nor pat for some time, the old farmyard was clean, almost immaculately so. Buddleia grew from between the slabs. Dandelions and thistles in the cracks. A cursory glance revealed rust on the corrugated roof of the barn. The old lady stopped for a moment, halting the whir and grate of the churn to add hot water. She looked up at him, her face strained, her grey hair wild, two single strands flat against the sweat of her cheek, her chest rising and falling with the effort. A stout lady, she had a kind face, but a tough one, knotted as it was by years of hard work. “My, don’t you look a state,” she said, as she looked him up and down. She wiped the hair back from her face. “I wondered if you’d come

this year," she said.

"Has no one been by in a while, Clíona?" he asked her, pointing back from where he'd come.

"Ah, sure, that old lane." With her hands on her side, she stretched her back and looked skyward for a moment. It made her dizzy. She put her hand out to the churn as she looked back towards the ground. Wiping her hands in her apron, she soon found her bearings. "Last time anyone was down there it was Paddy Brady to drown the young curs. A sad day, t'was. But they come around from the other side now. Bring me fuel and groceries for the use of the south-west paddock. Keep an old mare down there."

Her face grew confused as she looked about. "Damn," she muttered. "Here, keep stirring this for me, will ye. I've forgotten the salt."

A few minutes later she appeared at the door, her hand latched to the frame as she took the two steps in turn. "There's some heat under the kettle," she said as she approached, the salt in hand. She was just in time. The butter was forming, the handle of the churn turning stiff. Cornelius lifted the lid and looked inside.

"Just about done," he said as he added the salt. He'd begun sweating himself and had already removed his jacket. He poured the milk from the churn into a basin and poured cold water from a jug over the butter. When he was satisfied it was clean, he scooped it out and pressed it. Blue rubbed herself against his leg and sniffed the air.

"It's the buttermilk she's after," the widow said. She poured a small amount from the basin into an old bowl. "Now here you go, girl."

o

Fierce perspiration rolled down Cornelius's face, forcing him back from the hearth. Above the mantle, a shoulder of pork hung,

turning slow on a long, dangling hook. Smoke funnelled in to the kitchen. She lifted the pork and inspected it. After opening the window, she directed him back outside. He carried the tray with the teapot out with them. "So are you going upstream or down?" she asked, as they sat on the old wooden bench that creaked with their weight. The humidity was building in the day, drawing a swarm of midges towards them. Cursing mildly, he swatted the air vainly with his hands.

"Here, I have something that'll help ye with that," she said. From somewhere in her apron she fished a pipe and box of matches. It was already packed. "I thought you might come about, so I dug this out of Seamus's belongings. He liked to heat the pipe, he did."

Cornelius's hands trembled as he struck the match and held it to the pipe, adding a whiff of sulphur to the faint trace of coconut from the nearby furze. It was joined moments later, and after a bit of puffing, by the sweet aroma of tobacco smoke. The midges persisted for a time, but the irritation slowly eased.

"So are you going upstream or down?" she repeated, as he crossed his legs at his ankles and relaxed back into the bench.

"Down," he said. "Always down."

"Like an idiot."

He started laughing. "You always say the same thing, you know. Always. 'Like an idiot.' But you've never told me about the joys of climbing."

"It's not supposed to be easy."

"Ah, I'm just following the river till..."

"...Till ye get to the dam. I know, I know. Always descending. Always towards the great wide expanse of a free river's end. But what is it? To remind yerself of your life beforehand? To mark Mary's passing? What is it you can't let go of?" She looked at him as she spoke, saw his eyes studiously avoid contact. "Everyone wants to go

downriver. But it's downriver that the land floods, and well ye know it; at least before the dam was built anyway." She observed him as she took a sip from her tea. Although she didn't quite understand it, she knew he blamed the dam for her sister's death; that Mary had lived a number of years in Poul nabrone was unimportant to his telling. Aye, almost everyone had been heartbroken. Part of his madness, she supposed.

"I remember once, standing at a fulacht fiath," she said, her tone quiet but matter-of-fact. "I didn't know it at the time; I was young, and had only heard the name from my dear father, God rest his soul. We were going up to where the Folly is birthed. I remember it was torrential, and the brooks and gullies were all filling with water, so that it ran overland and through the land, and these little rivulets were forming and joining. Well, we came upon this horse-shoe mound built into the slope, catching the water. Up by the glaisín. They used to drop hot stones in them, so they could cook and bathe. But ye see, we'd come from down below. We'd crossed the land, passed the villages and forts built where the waters meet, passed what had been stamped and worn into the land. We knew already the machines, the wheels that spin to drive the mills, like Flanagan's mill where my father used to bring his grain to be ground. It's closed down now, like everything else. But ye know, if we hadn't seen it coming we should have guessed, for the building of a dam is as natural to man's mind as the fulacht fiath or the mill. He sees the power of water, sees its energy, and knows if he can tame its wildness it can serve his needs. Ye see, it's just a giant fulacht fiath. Provides heat for cooking and bathing, and a few other things besides.

"Of course, the problem is that we often unlearn, forget that water is heedless to our needs. From bank to bank we build barriers, separate highland from plain, east from west, one man from another.

er. It's how we falter. But rivers don't care. They bend and turn and continue their flow even as their waters turn to blood. And we leave behind our ruins of wisdom and folly." She stared blankly at some distant spot.

"Aye, it helps to go upstream, because if ye end at the dam, ye forget the fulacht fiath's significance."

Cornelius shifted his weight and gazed into the distance where the river snaked indolent and steady. The waters were low, the sand and gravel of the lee exposed over broad stretches. Tracing its path, his eye halted where the river altered direction and the valley's axis shifted towards the east. Two Friesian's at the penultimate bend, specks of black and white on the mottled patina of poached earth. At the elbow, rapids. A clump of deciduous woodland against the low bluff. It seemed to him that man had forgotten his nature; that he believed so completely in his dominion that he'd forgotten we were as fluid through time as the drops of water that melded and merged and meandered through life; at first young and with vigour and even destructive, our calm and languorous path coming later when our sedate existence influenced the world with persistence and stamina and fertility.

It was war that man forgot, the drumbeat of savage hearts, each beat a drop and in each drop a torrent. He listened to the morning radio, to the traipse through the mire of a world's torments. At night shards of shrapnel tore the land. Humiliation. Entitlement. Expectation. Always somewhere, a ruler of men who understood nothing of wildness, only control.

Eventually he spoke: "You know we were the last to leave. Mary didn't want to go. Me neither. We watched that wall being built, its shadow stretching long into our lives. They told us it was a revolutionary spark. That it would light the world for us. But there's no magnet spinning through the coils of a heart, nor turbines. It broke

her heart, leaving like that. Being moved to a house in a crumbling village, riven with cracks and mold.”

“It’s still the same?”

“Same as always. Still crumbling and nothing ever done about it. But then there’s no point in telling people that. They just think you’re crazy. Think I’m crazy.”

“Mad as a coot, ye are,” she said, her smile turning to a low cackle.

His cheeks flamed red for a moment, and he grew sheepish. His embarrassment amused her, although she was astute enough to read unspoken thoughts in his silence. He began speaking, but hesitated, his words garbled as he sought expression. “I’ve met someone else,” he eventually said, rewarding her patience. If he sounded uncertain, he was. He didn’t know quite what to think himself, let alone how his wife’s sister would judge this sixty-nine-year-old’s dalliance with passion. That he hadn’t ceased mourning further confused him.

In any event, he needn’t have worried about the widow’s blessings. “Oh, that’s great,” she said, and all at once leaned and hugged him. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Well, it’s nothing certain or even important yet. I mean, she’s married, and a young one too.”

She pursed her lips at that. “Anyone I know?”

“Cassandra Clony.”

The widow looked at him tenderly, searched his eyes for sincerity. She ran her rough but gentle fingers down his cheek. “Oh, dear. You really are mad. You’re in for heartbreak with that one.”

“I know. But...”

“I know, but...’ Those are famous last words.”

He grew taciturn. She changed the conversation.

“So what else are you doing with yerself these days?”

“Still writing stories.”

“Ah, give up that aul pony, would ye. You’ve been at that for years; almost as long as I’ve known ye.” She turned towards the sun, felt its warmth soak into her.

“Tell me, is there any word from Lynn?” he asked her.

At the mention of Lynn’s name she grew crestfallen. “No, not for some time.”

“Ah, that’s a pity. The young don’t seem to care as they used to. And Eamon? Is he still in America?”

“He is. Can’t come home or he won’t get back in. Did I tell you he has a kid? I have a great-grandson. Must be three this year.” She had told him; said the same thing to him for the last two years. He grew doleful.

They sat chatting easy for a while, before the passage of the sun prompted his departure. “Don’t wait for next year’s anniversary to visit,” she said as he left her, alone in the world but for Blue and the waters calling.

o

Hugging the valley’s walls, he picked his way downstream and passed cottages and an ever increasing number of homes set into the roadside. The road rose and rounded a knoll where Douglas-fir stood young and dense. On the other side, the valley opened wide, the broad expanse of the reservoir coming into view. He clamoured down slope and off the road and joined a series of steps set with oak sleepers into the incline. Just ten minutes later he stood on the pebble shore of the lake, the water gently lapping. Everything surreal, remembered but unfamiliar.

Following the eastward path, he took to the low-lying ridge of the northern shore. With the sun now in descent, the nearby hills cast shade. Boughs of beech swayed, and cherry blossoms swirled and floated and drifted gently downwards. The trail twisted,

The Absurd Demise of Poul nabrone

through stilts of birch, about towering stems, about contorted trunks, cutting through faults of ivy and grass and patches of bluebells and allium as the canopy opened. Large smooth rocks and shallow pools. Weeping pendants. Narcissus pleading for a view.

Tired from his long walk, he lay on his back and gripped the long grass, his nails scratching the earth, his feet against the oak's trunk, stretching outwards from this king of branch, stem and root. A robin danced about. A quick flutter. A quick burst into song. Overhead a pigeon idling towards his mate. His mate shifting on the branch. He smiled at the bird's nervousness, a melancholic smile.

Sullied and weary, he approached the water, finding space amongst the antlered branches of alder, the slender whips of birch. The dam rose to the north. Old houses dotted about the shore; some close, some set back amongst the trees. Old and massive. Red brick and white plaster. Victorian and baroque. Newer homes being built, great houses of wealth and influence in this leafy idyll. He passed some holiday makers from the town, there to picnic and play, to let their children splash about in the shallow sands or leap from the wooden jetties into this cold water amongst the low hills, where it was rumoured that when the water ran low, a town could be observed, a submerged entity sacrificed to the Gods of electric current and economic development. Amongst them was a man with wrenching breath and swollen red hands and a sick purple face, a combustible complexion slowly imploding. "Wasn't there a monastery here on this land?" he was asked by the man. Nauseated, he turned from his breath, his stale smoked clothes, the rancid odour of unwashed flesh and beer, offering only a quick reply of affirmation before hurriedly moving on. But such were the numbers there was no moving on from the crowds. They were everywhere. They came not just from Poul nabrone, but from far and

wide, to view and inspect this marvel, this man-made lake, this concrete wall where water foamed and thrashed at the base, this symbol of power and control and progress. It was the strength of the rumours that drew them, the tales of a resort, of a scenic neighbourhood with houses as big as the dam, of paths that followed the shore from which one could pry, of mazes in the gardens where it was possible to be lost and never found. Peeping toms standing at fences and hedges. Infinite curiosity and desire. He trundled past in contempt; contempt for the envy; contempt for the grand estates.

He was amazed at the growth of the place. A golf club. A hotel. Jetties and boat clubs. A small chapel. More homes, large on sprawling estates, or just large. More cars than Poul nabrone had ever seen and roads smooth with neither pothole nor blemish. What had become a resort was now an enclave where wealth clumped and gathered. And as he did each time, he marked the water's level and saw that it didn't change. "This will be the ruin of us," he grumbled, unsure of how, but certain of this premonition, nonetheless.

He wondered how the owners of the estates would answer such prophecy. Would they tell him that there was beauty in wealth? That their truth was other than his? That they belonged amongst those that understood that there is no owning of wealth without being owned; that their estates do not belong to them, but they to their estates; that they are indistinguishable from what they possess? Or would they say nothing at all, but settle into a slow intent, a silent declaration, a vow of fealty to this place of virtue and all else diminished? Most likely, they'd ignore him or declare him mad, like all others.

"Pah," he growled and spat, frightening a little boy, who having slipped away from his parents, paddled about at the water's edge. He cringed as the child began to cry and fled to his parents.

The Absurd Demise of Poul nabrone

He looked about. A dinghy moored in the shallows invited escape. He stepped into the water and immediately drew a sharp breath. Slow steps at first, feeling the cold bite. Ripples spreading from his legs. He looked down. His trousers were floating, sinking at the seam, narrow umbels spreading outwards, downwards two stamens, anthers on hard pebbles. He waded faster, almost running, his trousers clinging to his pale legs, his feet striking jutting stone. Almost there, he slowed, his hand reaching outwards as he stumbled. He reached the boat and shivered.

Why he did this he didn't know. For the beautiful otter, body sleek, gliding forward, head resting on the surface as its webbed paws paddled? There were none in those waters he knew, but he could imagine. He could imagine the fish aplenty, the osprey circling, three he counted, circling but not diving, maybe having taken their fill, maybe waiting for his departure, he couldn't tell. The blue and orange and green kingfisher. Butterflies of various shades of earthy brown descending on his body, seeking salt. Deer lapping by the water's edge.

He drifted into the water, drifted slowly along the shaded bank, nudging gently against the tall grass, its colour green, its nature a fusion, denying the water its liberty from earthly vegetation. He drifted towards the lake's centre, free from the flies, free from where he could see humans, swarming. Come back they called to him. Come back. Come back from where? he wondered.

o

His daughter was waiting anxiously when he pulled up to the shore. She wasn't alone. The two women accompanying her wandered off slowly and sat down by the wooden jetty. She greeted him roughly.

"Good God, Dad. What's gotten into you?" She was more than a little perturbed by his solitary adventure. "Oh God, you're soaked.

You'll get pneumonia. Here, just as well I thought to bring you a spare change of clothes."

"Ah here, let it rest, Lily."

"But Dad, I have to deal with these people for business, and here you are drawing attention to yourself. Could you not do that here? At least not here."

Cornelius knew what his daughter meant. They were in the company of better people. This was the lakeshore. Even those by the Dublin Road didn't merit such attention. Here, the ceilings rose so high they almost didn't exist. He looked up at a big house. He knew his daughter would have loved to have lived there for she would have loved to have been the lady of a house that was worth having a lady. "They're dreams and aspirations of no value," he said to his daughter, nodding towards the house as he spoke.

"Damn you old man, they're business. This is my business. It puts food on the table."

He grew silent for a moment. Both of them glared at each other. "I just wanted to see if I could see the old village below," he eventually said.

She eyed him curiously. "Well...?"

"Well, what?"

"Did you see it?"

"I didn't look."

That wasn't exactly the answer she was looking for, and instead only sent her off in a huff. He watched her approaching the two women, pen and papers in hand, drawing patterns, adding numbers. He was proud of her. She'd made a solid business making wedding dresses, and earned quite a reputation. He was sorry he'd agreed to the lift home, but he was there now. The evening chill caught him as the sun sank beneath the hills. His attention drifted. The air was tranquil. Not a sound but the lapping of the water.

A controlled flood, the lake served as a reminder of an ever-changing world. Only the process was constant, a recurrence eternally winding through the landscape. He had seen the signs as he'd walked, seen the striated lines of former paths, of curving depressions marking the bounds of a river's curve. Swamp and sodden earth. Riverine shale. Calmness for the most part, waters shallow and easy. But it was not always so, he knew. He'd seen it otherwise, seen the rains fall in torrents and waters bloat, and what was peaceful grown irate, raging through earth and forest consuming bough and limb and chunks of earth with ravenous hunger. And in their swiftness, stems borne like twigs or grains of sediment so deposits like gold they'd become, ghostly reminders of a spectacle, of an elemental conjuring of the Gods of mountains, sky and water. Banks broken. Distension. Mineral laden murk spread low through open fields. Percolation through the sieve of porous soil. Silt cast wide with neither favour, nor discrimination. For all things permeable flood, and all things saturated alter, and all things permanent are reconsidered, for nothing is certain where a river runs past, and those that live by rivers know that best.